



a program of United Spinal Association

**Statement for the Record**  
**of**  
**VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association**  
**Submitted by**  
**Christopher J. Neiweem**  
**Director of Veterans Policy**  
**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on Health**  
**Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**Regarding**  
**H.R. 3508, H.R. 183, H.R. 2527, and H.R. 2974**  
**March 27, 2014**



Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and other distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share VetsFirst's views on four of the bills under consideration today.

VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association, represents the culmination of over 65 years of service to veterans and their families. We advocate for the programs, services, and disability rights that help all generations of veterans with disabilities remain independent. This includes access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) financial and health care benefits, housing, transportation, and employment services and opportunities. Today, we are not only a VA-recognized national veterans service organization, but also a leader in advocacy for all people with disabilities.

H.R. 3508, to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the qualifications of hearing aid specialists of the Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

VetsFirst believes veterans should have timely access to professional hearing care services to ensure a higher quality of life.

The VA's Office of Inspector General's February 2014 audit of hearing aid services found that VA was not timely in issuing new hearing aids to veterans and meeting its 5 day timeliness goal .The report indicated that VA audiology staff attributed the hearing service delays to inadequate staffing<sup>1</sup>. In addition to providing hearing aid services, these staff members are also required to conduct compensation and pension examinations.

Tinnitus and hearing loss were the most prevalent service-connected disabilities in FY 2012 for veterans receiving disability compensation<sup>2</sup>. It is concerning that VA has not adequately anticipated the demand for hearing services, and in turn created a staffing model to meet the challenge. I, like many veterans of all eras, have experienced acoustic trauma due to my military service.

With the prevalence of explosions from artillery, and the sound of rifle-fire in training operations and combat operations, it is not surprising that many veterans have hearing loss. Audiology staff having to divide their time between compensation and pension exams is understandable. However, not adjusting current staff workloads appropriately to meet the timeliness delay is not acceptable.

This legislation would allow VA to appoint hearing aid specialists to assist veterans in receiving quicker access to needed services. These professionals are licensed in their respective states and can provide robust services that include: hearing testing; determining necessity for hearing

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Office of Audits and Evaluations*, Audit of VA's Hearing Aid Services ,February 20, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

assistive devices; performing hearing aid adjustments; taking impressions for ear molds, and providing counseling and aural rehabilitation. These hearing aid specialists have received extensive training and hundreds of professionals are currently entering the industry. The legislation's reporting requirements related to wait times and contract referrals will also help identify remaining gaps in hearing care services.

VetsFirst strongly supports H.R. 3508.

#### H.R. 183 Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act

Service animals promote independence for people with disabilities and break down societal barriers; thus, promoting community reintegration. Consequently, VetsFirst supports efforts to ensure that properly trained service animals are available to veterans who can benefit from their assistance.

This legislation would require VA to establish a pilot program to allow veterans with mental health needs to train service dogs for fellow veterans with disabilities. Specifically, this legislation addresses two critical needs by providing service dogs to veterans who are seeking the assistance of a service dog and giving veterans with post-deployment mental health concerns or post-traumatic stress disorder the opportunity to benefit from training these dogs. The dual nature of this approach will assist a wide range of veterans.

Veterans who assist with training the service dogs will be required to follow a structured training process to ensure that the animals are properly trained. The legislation also requires VA to collect data regarding the effectiveness of the program. Lastly, veterans participating may even be able to use the skills they acquired as a trainer to successfully pursue a career in the service animal field.

VetsFirst strongly supports H.R. 183.

#### H.R. 2527 to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide veterans with counseling and treatment for sexual trauma that occurred during inactive duty training

VetsFirst knows that access to VA healthcare is a lifeline for many veterans who seek assistance for mental health conditions that may result from military sexual trauma (MST).

Reservist and Guard personnel who are serving their weekend duty requirements are not considered to be on Active Duty under the law. Instead, these personnel are on Inactive Duty for Training (IADT) status. Title 38 currently excludes these service members from accessing needed VA counseling and treatment due to MST.

This legislation would provide Reservist and Guard personnel who suffer an MST while on IADT status with access to related healthcare services at VA. MST assaults occurring during military

service can have a devastating impact on a service member's mental health and well-being. Timely access to quality VA health care is critical in assisting these service members with the counseling and treatment they need. This bill would expand those services to a greater number of our brave men and women.

VetsFirst strongly supports H.R. 2527.

H.R. 2974 To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the eligibility for beneficiary travel for veterans seeking treatment or care for military sexual trauma in specialized outpatient or residential programs at facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

VetsFirst strongly supports access to beneficiary travel for veterans requiring treatment at VA health care facilities.

This legislation would expand beneficiary travel to veterans who need specialized outpatient or residential VA healthcare due to MST. We strongly believe that expanding access to beneficiary travel to include MST survivors sends a message that encourages veterans to pursue the treatments currently available for these conditions. By receiving the care they need, we hope that veterans who have experienced MST will be able to more fully reintegrate into their community.

VetsFirst strongly supports H.R. 2974.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our supportive views on these important pieces of legislation. We believe that passage of these bills will be of great value to veterans with disabilities. This concludes my statement.

**Information Required by Clause 2(g) of Rule XI of the House of Representatives**

Written testimony submitted by Christopher Neiweem, Director of Veterans Policy, VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association; 1660 L Street, NW, Suite 504; Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 556-2076, ext. 7702.

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association.

In fiscal year 2012, United Spinal Association served as a subcontractor to Easter Seals for an amount not to exceed \$5000 through funding Easter Seals received from the U.S. Department of Transportation. This is the only federal contract or grant, other than the routine use of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for Veterans Service Officers that United Spinal Association has received in the current or previous two fiscal years.

## **Christopher J. Neiweem**

Christopher J. Neiweem is the Director of Veterans Policy at VetsFirst, which is a program of United Spinal Association.

Mr. Neiweem began his tenure with the organization in September 2013. His responsibilities include promoting the policy priorities of VetsFirst to the U.S. Congress, White House, federal agencies, and veteran service organization community.

Has been advocating for veterans at the federal level since 2011. After spending 6 years in the U.S. Army Reserve, which included a deployment to Iraq in 2003 to detain prisoners and support base security as a military police soldier, he attended college in his home state of Illinois. Chris completed a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science at Northern Illinois University, which included a summer internship in the Washington D.C. office of Congressman Donald Manzullo. He went on to graduate school utilizing the Post 9-11 G.I. Bill and completed a Master's Degree in Political Affairs, at the University of Illinois at Springfield. During graduate school he completed 2 internships. The first at Springfield-based consulting firm Cook Witter Inc., and the other for the U.S. Senate campaign of now Senator Mark Kirk.

Since graduation Chris relocated to the Washington D.C. area where he uses his experience in policy and military affairs to impact the federal benefits and services of our nation's veterans at VetsFirst.

